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ABSTRACT

Some research findings show that vocational education courses deter teenagers from dropping out of high school. Traits identified in potential dropouts by the research include being from a poverty-level home, having a lower intelligence score, and having a lower grade point average. These traits are shared with students in vocational education classes, with enrollment in vocational education classes playing a role in retaining students in school. A number of studies confirm that the more vocational education courses that are taken, the less likely it is for a student to drop out of school. These findings suggest the value of identifying potential dropouts in grade school and encouraging those students to enroll in vocational education as soon as possible. (KC)

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WHAT EFFECT DOES VOCATIONAL EDUCATION HAVE ON THE DROPOUT RATE?
(by Maureen A. Hagen)

The first publicly supported high school opened in 1821 with an enrollment of 176 students. Two years after the school opened, 76 of the original students had dropped out. By the turn of the century only 11 percent of high school aged children were actually in school, and approximately 10 percent of the male students received a high school diploma. Since that time, the high school age population has increased and helped to reduce the dropout rate because of the emphasis on compulsory education.

In the 1950's the dropout rate, for the first time, declined to below 50 percent. At the present time, it is estimated that at a national level almost 30 percent of the students entering 5th grade leave school prior to graduation. Since the 1970's this dropout rate has remained constant and translates into approximately 800,000-1,000,000 children dropping out of school annually (Weber 1986).

Philadelphia is trying to keep at-risk students from dropping out of high school. Several programs have been developed to help solve this growing problem.

One such program is High School Academies, schools-within-schools that provide at-risk students training in academic and vocational skills.

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Students go from class to class as a group, there is team teaching, a highly structured environment, extensive parental involvement, part-time work and upon graduation, help in getting a job or admission to a postsecondary institution.

There are 10 academy programs in which there is a 90 percent attendance rate, a near-zero dropout rate, and an employment or postsecondary education placement rate for graduates of 85 percent. This program was begun in 1969 and is now serving 1,400 students, the academies will expand to serve 5000 students.

Another program is the JobSearch Program. Begun in 1983, JobSearch helps juniors and seniors to acquire the priceless skill of getting a job. Within the school there is a simulated private business office. There is wall-to-wall carpeting, potted palms, modern furnishings, a copy machine, several telephones, video cameras for practice interviews, and a computer to use in preparing resumes and letters. Under a teacher's direction juniors conduct self-directed job searches for part-time or summer jobs while the seniors work toward full-time jobs for after graduation (Holmes, Collins 1988).

In 1986 the dropout rate was 11.2 percent among school age children in Milwaukee. The Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC) initiated Second Chance, a program that helps dropouts that are between the ages

of 16 and 18 to earn their diplomas. Second Chance tries to help the students:

- a. acquire self-esteem,
- b. identify various career and interest groups,
- c. set career goals,
- d. learn to apply for and get jobs,
- e. succeed on the job, and
- f. learn proper study habits and skills.

By October 1987 the program had helped 24 students receive their diplomas and 35 students to obtain their GED. Contacted were 1,576 teenagers from April to October 1987, 454 did go back to school. In addition MATC has reached another 378 students that were identified as potential dropouts and successfully urged them to remain in school (Hopgood 1988).

DeRidder (1988) believes that by third grade approximately 70 percent of eventual dropouts can be identified. They usually are from families who live in poverty or close to it, usually obtain their income from low-skill jobs or government sources and they are more and more headed by single parents. Many of the parents dropped out of school themselves.

These children have been labeled by some teachers in kindergarten or first grade as not being academically ready, so they end up being neglected because of the teacher/student ratio. This label continues until the child eventually fails. Some studies have shown that being retained one grade increases the risk of dropping out later by 40-50

percent, two grades by 90 percent.

Welsh (1979) sent a questionnaire to 89 guidance counselors in Pennsylvania. Of the 89 counselors, 70 felt that the cooperative education program in their school affected the dropout problem, while 19 counselors felt that this program made no difference at all in decreasing the dropout rate. These same counselors were asked what percent of students were deterred from dropping out of school because of this program. The results were that approximately 10 percent of the population may have been deterred from dropping out of school because of the Cooperative Education Program.

Campbell's (1986) findings demonstrates that Vocational Education in the high school is serving an important function both for society and for individuals. By keeping more students in school we are decreasing the unemployment rate of young adults.

A large number of students enrolled in vocational courses come from poor families, have somewhat lower academic ability as measured by conventional ability tests, and earn a lower grade point average than those in the tenth-grade academic curriculum. Therefore the high school vocational programs require the programs to be especially sensitive to poverty, previously less successful school experience, and lower academic ability (Campbell 1986).

Mertens (1982) study was conducted to explore the effects of vocational education on the high school dropout rate. The New Youth Cohort of the National Longitudinal Surveys of Labor Market Experience (NLS Youth) was used for the population. The population was 12,686 young people who were fourteen to twenty-one years old when first

interviewed in 1979. Using the high school transcripts the researcher was able to determine the actual number of credits received in vocational education. Then separate samples were taken to determine the highest grade completed.

The effect of vocational education on dropping out was significant for grades 10 and 12, but not so for grade 11. One reason given for these results in grade 11 is that at this age students may legally leave school. The results of this study showed that all else being equal (family background, age, SES, etc.) the more vocational education courses that were taken, the less likely it was for the student to drop out of school.

In Weber's (1986) study dropping out of high school is related to a variety of individual and social consequences:

Individual consequences--Often dropouts, because of a lack of basic education, are frustrated, feel out of place, and have many more disappointments when trying to secure and retain employment. High school dropouts also tend to earn less over their lifetimes than graduates. Since dropouts typically have fewer job opportunities and advancements, they pay less taxes and are more often on welfare than high school graduates.

Legal consequences--According to police statistics, dropouts are 6 to 10 times more likely to be involved in criminal acts than in-school students. In state prisons about 85 percent of the inmates are school dropouts.

Health-related consequences--In recent studies, high school dropouts are more likely to have high blood pressure and heart attacks due to the high level of stress in their lives. For someone who cannot read or write even filling out an employment application may be quite threatening.

Educational consequences--Children of dropouts have a greater chance of dropping out. A study done in West Virginia found that 75-80 percent of the students who drop out have parents who dropped out. Discipline problems, truancy, student violence, alcohol and drug abuse, and teenage pregnancy are also related to dropping out of school.

Economic consequences--It costs the nation far more money to support dropouts than it would have cost to educate them.

Although a cause and effect relationship between dropping out and the types of individual and social concerns listed cannot be documented, it does show that the dropout problem is widespread and quite complex. It affects not only the dropouts but the graduates also.

Weber (1987) used the data from the High School + Beyond (HS+B) sophomore cohort for his study which was to evaluate what vocational experiences are related most to individual students' decisions not to dropout of high school. He identified two groups of students, both with a high probability to dropout. The students in one group actually did dropout of school either in grade 10, 11, or 12, whereas

the second group of students completed high school. He compared the two groups high school experience, he was especially concerned with their vocational experience in school. Using 119 variables, a comprehensive assessment of differences between the two groups of students was conducted using a discriminant function. The reason for this assessment was to show the similarity of the two groups. Finally several comparisons were made between the two groups which related to their vocational high school experiences. The students that stayed in school had more vocational education courses then those who dropped out.

The findings show that if a student stays in school long enough to enroll in vocational education courses they will probably not dropout of school. Potential dropouts should be diagnosed in elementary school and immediately placed in the Vocational Education Program upon entering high school. Although there is more research needed on this topic, some additional studies should be done on diagnosing the potential dropout in elementary school.

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